

Stevensville*

Some say ice cream can cure most anything!

Cassius Stevens parked on Main Street, got out, and leaned against the side of his coupe. He closed his eyes and smiled up at the sun as if it were shining down just for him. He could picture the old storefronts running up and down either side of the street, at least those that had been there since his father was a kid. Pappy had told him, “Them foreigners moving here, thinking there’s an easy buck to be made will find they be wrong, not last the year out. Family buys from family or waits for the ‘Going out of Business’ sign to appear in the window. Blacks ain’t got enough money to keep ‘em afloat.” If they were outside, his father would spit tobacco juice. “First white likely only going in after that sign goes up.”

He laughed just thinking it. The Jew ice cream store had been there for six months. Things were no better. Kids like his younger brother Lee, only going in to see what a Jew looked like. Lee telling him how Katie asked for a vanilla cone and while he was scooping leaned in and asked, “Hey, Mister, where’re your horns,” and then ran out laughing without ever paying.

He was thinking pappy taught little Jeb right. He hand-lettered a sign, “Coloreds here ==>,” went in, walked to the back of the store, took the gum out of his mouth, and splattered it and his sign in the middle of the glass case. He strutted out cackling in his high voice, “Ha-ha. There’s some Southern Hospitality fer ya.”

He saw Cousin Anders racing on his scooter down the block. When he got to the ice cream store, Cassius whistled. Anders turned and fell. He stayed on the sidewalk, stared at his skinned knee, and started crying.

Cassius placed his hands on his butt considered pushing off and checking on him. He looked the other way down the street. The old black woman who used to clean for the family was rushing over so fast her cane could barely keep up. She planted it to the side of the boy and struggled to lean over. She and Anders talked some. She went into the store, came out with some wet paper towels, and did her best to clean up the scrape before spotting it dry with a tissue she took from her large purse. Cassius remembered her name, Aunt Jemima – *that’s what we always called her.*

A minute later, the Jew-boy came out with an ice cream cone and a small wooden chair. He put the chair in the shade of the doorway, gave Anders the cone, and helped him to stand. He hobbled to the chair with the cone in one hand. The other held tightly to the Jew-boy who dragged along the scooter and leaned it against the storefront.

He said something to Aunt Jemima and then rushed back into the store. He watched as she chatted up Anders, daubed off some ice cream that had dripped on his chin, and then said something that made him smile. The Jew-man came out and gave her a chocolate cone. He looked across the street and seeing Cassius, made a sign that everything was okay. The old woman followed his gaze and waved once she recognized him.

Cassius couldn’t hear what they were saying but Aunt Jemima smiled and nodded.

The Jew-man was saying that in a small town like this she must have heard about Jeb’s note, this boy being another Stevens. “I was so upset I called Mr. Stevens; told him how disappointed I was with little Jeb. And unless Jeb apologized, he wouldn’t be welcome here again. Mr. Stevens laughed and advised me not to hold my breath. ‘We don’t buy from Jew-boys down here.’ I thought for a moment and then said, ‘Well, if he apologizes he can have two scoops free. That way he won’t have to buy anything.’”

Nor did he hear her laugh and thank him for trying. He smiled and said, “We can only do our best.”

Cassius stared as she started walking back up the street. The ice cream glistened, a lighter color than her skin. The same sun beat down on his head. He was thinking. *Neither of them two seemed uppity. Jew didn’t do bad here and Anders seemed happy with his free cone. Never even looked back at me. Should at least have waved. If I hadn’t whistled he never would have gotten that free cone, just gone sailing by that store.*

He got back in his car. Three blocks later, he turned off Main. *Maybe tomorrow, early like, when no one’s about, I’ll drive back in and get a cone. See what the Jew really looks like; bet he knows Aunt Jemima’s name.*

The next day Mr. Klein told Cassius the name of the elderly woman is Scarlett Higginbotham. He reminded him about his offer of two free scoops for Jeb.

“You come back with Jeb and I’ll even give you one free scoop if you buy the other. A man’s got to make a living.”

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